

HERITAGE LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN SOUTH KOREA AND CHALLENGES FACED BY MARRIAGE IMMIGRANT WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

As international marriages become increasingly in South Korea, the number of children from multicultural families is on the rise. Recently, to promote social integration, the Korean government started to encourage heritage language (HL) education among children from multicultural families. In this study, we mainly intend to examine the difficulties and challenges in the HL education experienced by marriage immigrant women in South Korea. Such challenges were analyzed and discussed from perspectives of family-based language education mode, external sociocultural environment, and language communication environment.

KEYWORDS: *Heritage Language Education, Multicultural Society, Children from Inter-lingual Families, Marriage Immigrant Women, South Korean Society*

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INTRODUCTION

The South Korean society with a shared ancestral lineage and common culture was traditionally regarded as one of the most monolingual and monoethnic society in the world (Shin, 2006). However, Korea today has been experiencing rapid demographic changes and embraced a great number of foreigners since two decades ago. The number of foreign entries roared from only 2,719,850 in 1990 to the peak of 14,264,508 in 2014, with an increase more than five times¹.

Marriage migrants are a special group of immigrants since they apply for permanent residency and their offspring legally has Korean nationality. South Korea's international marriage began in 1990s, when some marriage intermediary groups and religious groups introduced brides from Southeast Asia and China, in order to help rural men and low-income men to get married. The rate of international marriages is recently increasing (one out of ten marriages), as a result, the number of children growing up in international marriage families is on the rise, and they are called multicultural children for short in Korea. Those children get the chance to encounter two languages since birth, and they are supposed to have the opportunity to become a native bilingual speaker or even an outstanding multilingual speaker.

Based on multiculturalism, the potential language ability of multicultural children is considered as a resource at both individual and social levels (Nieto S., 2009). HLs should be regarded as an untapped resource with great benefit as they provide a level of language expertise that is urgently needed in Korea, given the demand for professional language skills to compete with the global economy and to meet Korea's strategic needs

¹ <http://www.immigration.go.kr/>

(Brecht and Ingold 2002). However, to become a native bilingual speaker is not so easy that children just pick up languages without any effort (De Houwer, 2009).

As for research on language education to multicultural children, the early studies found that for children from bilingual families versus ordinary families, their language development ability (Korean) was very low (Park, & Jung, 2007; Koo, Park, & Choi, 2009; Kim, & Park, 2009), and one of the reasons was attributed to the Korean insufficiency of the foreign parent, mostly foreign mother (Park, Lee, & Park, 2014). Because of this viewpoint, the Korean government, through diverse institutions and organizations, provided free intensified Korean education to foreign parents and their multicultural children. Since 2006, the governmental policy transferred to multiculturalism and the academia field also gradually realized the importance of HL education during the children's growth period. If a child did not understand the language of the immigrant mother, the mother would be edged out of child-rearing, which led to family conflicts and children's low self-esteem. On the contrary, the promotion of HL education improved the mother-child relationship satisfaction, family relations, children's self-esteem and grades (Joe & Kim, 2013; Park, Lee, & Park, 2014; Huh & Chung, 2015).

In this study, we mainly intend to examine the difficulties in HL education experienced by marriage immigrant women in South Korea, and investigate the negative effects on HL education from a sociolinguistic perspective. Owing to the prestige of a language effect on language education (Lambert, 1977), this study is focused on one particular nationality of immigrant mothers – Chinese marriage immigrant women.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The term of heritage language is gaining currency, whereas an authoritative definition is hardly to be determined. Wiley (1999) said that as with any attempt to apply a single label to a complex situation, defining heritage language is problematic. In 1991, Cummins simply defined HL as “language other French and English” in Canadian context, and Fishman (1991) identified three types of heritage languages: immigrant languages, indigenous languages, and colonial languages. However, most of the studies on HL have focused on children of immigrant families, especially when both parents are from the same minority ethnic groups and speak a minority language at home exclusively or to some degree. However, as Park² indicated that there is less known about the linguistic trajectories of non-traditional heritage language learners, such as adoptees, children of interracial families, and later generation of immigrants. As heritage language learners’ backgrounds continue to diversify and become complex, researchers need to pay attention to the non-traditional heritage language education. Undoubtedly, the HL education for multicultural children with one parent being heritage speaker is more challenging compared with children with both parents being heritage speakers.

Language maintenance or loss is the main subjects of HL studies. The concepts such as language shift, language maintenance, language death and language spread are the central concepts of sociolinguistics. Wiley (1999) indicated that it is better to view the HL speakers and HL education from sociolinguistics perspective. Therefore, we are much more capable of identifying and addressing their different needs and examining the effect of any aspect of society on language education. Many scholars through studies examined the factors which effect on language maintenance or loss from sociolinguistics perspective. Lambert and Taylor (1990, 1996) outlined three major factors that contribute to language

https://www.academia.edu/14839336/Marginalized_Voices_of_Interracial_Families_in_Heritage_Language_Education

maintenance or loss: parents' commitment to the heritage language, the size and cohesiveness of the immigrant language group, and the openness of the host community to the arrival of the immigrants and to a multicultural ideal. Baker (2011) has combined a comprehensive listed the factors that may create language maintenance and shift in three dimensions: political, social and demographic Factors, cultural factors, and linguistic factors, while he also emphasized that power dimension missed from the list. Yamamoto (2001) has defined three aspects that influence children's bilingual language acquisition in inter-lingual families: linguistic environmental factors, sociocultural factors, and familial factors.

METHODS

The qualitative research method was adopted to examine the difficulties faced by Chinese marriage immigrant women in educating their offspring with Chinese. Eight participants were interviewed through snowball sampling. The interviewees (Table 1) including Korean Chinese³ and Han Chinese⁴ participated in the in-depth interviews. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured form to understand their experiences in teaching their offspring Chinese, in terms of their language and family backgrounds, and the difficulties and challenges encountered in this process from different aspects.

Table 1: Background Information of Participants

Int.	Age	Living Period	Ethnic Group*	Residence Type**	Num. of Children	First Child	
						Age	Chinese Skill
1	41	17	K.C.	F5	2	15	No
2	45	12	K.C.	K.N.	1	11	Understand little
3	41	13	K.C.	Kr.	2	7	No
4	33	8	H.C.	F5	2	5	Speak little
5	39	10	H.C.	F5	2	9	Speak little
6	33	4	H.C.	F6	1	5	Speak little
7	32	7	H.C.	K.N.	2	7	No
8	32	10	H.C.	F5	2	8	Basic conversation

***K.C.:** Korean Chinese

***H.C.:** Han Chinese

****F5:** Permanent Resident Visa

K.N.: Korean Nationality (naturalization)

F6: Marriage Immigrant Visa

RESULTS

After coding the interviews, we summarized the difficulties experienced by Chinese marriage immigrant women in HL education from three aspects: challenge in family education, pressure from sociocultural environment, and lack of HL communication environment. Although Han Chinese and Korean Chinese have different attitudes and cognitions to Chinese education, the difficulties and problems they have encountered are more similar than different.

Challenge in Family Education

In the first place, some difficulties and problems were found in the process of Chinese teaching in family education. HL education has its own particulars, so it is a real challenge for an ordinary mother without guidance from

³ Korean Chinese is the population of Koreans in China, and also named as Chaoxianzu whose ethnic language is Korean, and most of them in China are Chinese-Korean bilingual.

⁴ Han Chinese is an ethnic group and the majority in P.R. China, where they constitute about 92% of the population.

specialists of linguistic education. In addition, their attitude to teaching Chinese is not assertive.

Specialty of Non-Dominant First Language Education

The term of Bilingual first language (BLF) focusing on the simultaneous acquisition of two languages from birth (De Houwer, 2009) is gaining currency. From this perspective, Chinese is one of children's first languages. However, it is clear that Chinese is not the first language of monolinguality and may be considered as a non-dominant first language.

Acquisition of non-dominant first language is different from both normal first language acquisition and foreign language learning, and reduces parents' confidence in teaching their children to speak Chinese since it is beyond their common conception of language education. Participant 5, a long-time Chinese teacher in an education institution, said *"I well know how difficult it is to learn Chinese. I have worked hard to teach a Korean child for three years, but her Chinese skill is still rudimentary."* In this case, the misconception that Chinese is too difficult to learn becomes an obstacle in Chinese teaching. However, she does not realize that teaching her child Chinese is not foreign language teaching. She is able to "regularly input" (De Houwer, 2009) Chinese into her child if she acts as a mother rather than a teacher.

Meanwhile, using and teaching Chinese, which is a non-dominant language in the living environment, is occasionally refused by their children. When this occurs, participants 1 and 7 choose to give up, participants 4, 5 and 8 will concede, while participant 6 has no idea what to do. As for the question how to teach their children Chinese by themselves, participants all feel confused and the only way they know is to talk with their children in Chinese. However, when their children refuse to talk in Chinese, they have nobody tell them how to deal with this difficulty and therefore have to give up.

Conservative Attitude of Chinese Immigrant Mothers in Chinese Education

The parents' attitudes and beliefs in the conception of bilingualism can greatly affect the future bilingualism of a child (Barron-Hauwaert, 2004). In this study, neither Han Chinese nor Korean Chinese interviewees show any eagerness on teaching children Chinese, though they all agree that learning Chinese could benefit their children in the future.

Due to the same nationality between Korean Chinese immigrants and Han Chinese immigrants as well as the complexity of 'treating Chinese at home' (Jin, 2010), Korean Chinese immigrants, regarding the education of their children, prefer the integration into the Korean society, wishing their children to be 'ordinary and common Korean'. Although Han Chinese immigrants believe that Chinese education is a necessary part of their children's education, their Chinese teaching activities are hindered by the ideas that *"It's not urgent issue now"* and *"We can send children back to China to study in the future"*.

Most children of immigrants living in Korea are under 12 years old⁵ which is the critical period of language acquisition (Lenneberg, 1967). The inactive attitude and delayed teaching activities of Chinese mothers actually hinder the development of children's potential native Chinese competence.

Living Pressure Caused by Different Ways of Life between Chinese and Korean

Currently, most married females are mothers of young children. In China, usually grandparents, instead of parents, look after the child, but in Korea, mothers are essentially responsible for this task while the grandparents play a role of critics. Meanwhile, they also suffer from the family stresses caused by the language barrier between the couple,

⁵ 84% of multicultural children in South Korea were under 12 years old in 2014, according to the statistics released by South Korean Ministry of the Interior.

contradiction-law, difference in educational philosophy in parenting offspring, and the family exclusion, which have all aggravated their burden in adapting to the family cultures in Korea. Interviewer 6 said *“While learning Korean, I also need to manage the house and look after the child by myself. I once tried to learn Tang poems with my child, but recently get exhausted by housework, and now I even have no time to play with my child.”*

In addition, Chinese females are not willing to be housewives and think income is the basis of their life. However, the linguistic and cultural diversity has further complicated their adaption to the Korean society. Under the pressure of busy life, the married females are struggling to adapt to family life and society life, which scarify the time spent on basic education of children, let alone the additional education such as Chinese education.

Pressure from Sociocultural Environment

In another, there are also some difficulties examined as sociocultural factors, including the resistance of Chinese education caused by differences between Chinese and Korean sociocultural contexts, and the pressure of adaption caused by social assimilation into a monolingual and mono-cultural society with the “pure blood” social culture.

Assimilation into the Dominant Culture

Korea is proud of its monolingual and mono-cultural society with the “pure Korean bloodlines”⁶ social culture. Korean people hold an inherently negative attitude towards other cultures. The Asian immigrants in Korea are mostly labor workers in 3D industries and female marriage immigrants who are married with rural Korean men (Lee H., 2013), which leads to the discrimination and isolation of immigrants as well as their children from the society.

There are many news reports about the school violence to immigrant children such as that of Hwang min-woo⁷. Under such social atmosphere, many participants are quite worried about their children, fearing that their children will be isolated in school. As a result, they prefer to raise their children as a “complete Korean” and “no difference with Korean children”. Some children of the Korean Chinese participants even have no idea about the Chinese origin of his/her mother.

Strength Status of Social Dominant Language

HL education mainly depends on family education, and in the Korean case, that is the marriage immigrant mothers. So far, Korea is still known as a society replete with male chauvinism under the control of patriarchy. Korean men see themselves superior to their partners, so women are usually at a lower social position. Under such sociocultural environment, the Korean language, as the father's language, is more authoritative, so it is hard to build up a balanced bilingual environment in favor of HL education. Participant3 said *“when I try to talk with my child in Chinese, my parents in law always show me unhappy faces, emphasizing that I have married a Korean man and should teach my child Korean.”*

Also, there is a comment social cognition that language ability development of the children from multicultural families is slow comparing with native Korean children and the inadequate Korean language skills of immigrant mothers was the causation. These opinions negatively affect HL education in multicultural families. Han Chinese participants

⁶“Korea greets new era of multiculturalism”

<http://news.naver.com/main/read.nhn?mode=LSD&mid=sec&sid1=108&oid=044&aid=0000059491>

⁷ Hwang min-woo, the 8-year-old boy, was in favor after appearing in the MV of PSY's “Gunman style”. Due to his identity of half Korean and half Vietnamese, he was seriously criticized by some netizens and even was named “the hybrid borne by inferior people”. As a result, some people are worried that the idea of pure blood will destroy Korea in the future.

claimed that Korean is the first language of their children and they are more worried about their own Korean skills in language education. Interviewer 7 said *“I hope my child has very high Korean level, even higher than native Korean”*. Especially after their children attend schools, the pressure from a Korean-only education system has removed Chinese education from their lives.

Lack of HL Communication Environment

What's more, there are various difficulties related to the linguistic environment. The development of language proficiency is promoted by face-to-face interaction and communication (Johnson, K., & Johnson, H., 2007). In this study, we find that the lack of an HL communication environment is another distress in HL education for multicultural children in Korea. The children have less chance to communicate in HL with more people other than their mothers, and without “output” and “interaction”, the HL competence can be hardly promoted.

Lack of Appropriate External Education

HL education for multicultural children is not sufficiently supported from the society and schools in Korea. With Chinese education as example, as the prestige of Chinese is intensified in the world, a conducive environment for learning Chinese has formed in Korea. There are many ways to learn Chinese, such as interest-oriented classes after school, TV classes, Chinese educational institution, and even regular school course as second foreign language. However, the problem is that *“Yes, there seem to be many programs for Chinese learning outside the family, but such education is either too simple or focusing on grammar education, it is not what we want”*. In fact, those teaching programs target at Korean-speaking students to learn Chinese as a foreign language, but are inappropriate for children with one Chinese immigrant parent.

Lack of Communication Resources

In addition, children have less chance to practice Chinese other than with their mothers. Different from Chinese older-timers⁸, Chinese marriage immigrants as newcomers are widely distributed in Korea, which prevents them from forming a language communication society. As a result, children rarely have a Chinese chatting partner, or meet a regular Chinese peer friend. Therefore,

Keeping in contact with Chinese relatives is regarded as a good way to improve Chinese. However, in a traditional patriarchy society, the bride's family after marriage is no longer regarded as the bride's home. The Korean social culture has already changed much, but the older Korean generation, especially in rural areas, still keeps strong androcentric ideology. Given the social culture of androcentrism, even though the geographic distance is not far from China and the transportation system is very convenient, Chinese marriage immigrant mothers do not keep frequent contact with their Chinese relatives. Because of the less demand of communication in Chinese, children do not think Chinese is useful language and they do not feel that Chinese is necessary to learn.

DISCUSSIONS

We examined the difficulties of teaching offspring HL in Korean inter-lingual families, focusing on Chinese marriage immigrant women. We discussed the problem in HL education, the outside resistance to HL education from

⁸ It refers to the Chinese immigrants who migrated to Korean 100 years ago in Qing dynasty. They lived in relatively concentrated residential areas in Korea, such as China Town.

sociocultural environment, and the lack of lingual environment. We find HL education is a real challenge for both marriage immigrant mothers and the Korean society.

As the research results showed that Chinese marriage immigrant women do not receive much intervention or opposition during their Chinese education, when difficulty and resistance occur in the HL education, they cannot acquire support or external help. If they could not overcome the difficulty occurring during the education, the development of HL education would be hindered. In addition, South Korea is an androcentric country, and the foreign marriage immigrants are mostly females. Due to the family concept of androcentrism, the education of immigrant mother's language and culture is commonly intervened or even opposed by other family members.

CONCLUSIONS

The percentage of foreign immigrants and their children in Korea was predicted to be about 21.3% of total population in 2050. Korea can never maintain its mono-ethnic cultures. Now the Korean government, during promotion of bilingual education, also stresses the ways of HL education, but obviously does not pay enough attention to HL education. This study provides a case study for HL education under the context when the society transits from monoculture to multiculture. This study offers preliminary data for the government to well establish bilingual education policies and further promote the HL education for children from multicultural families.

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